

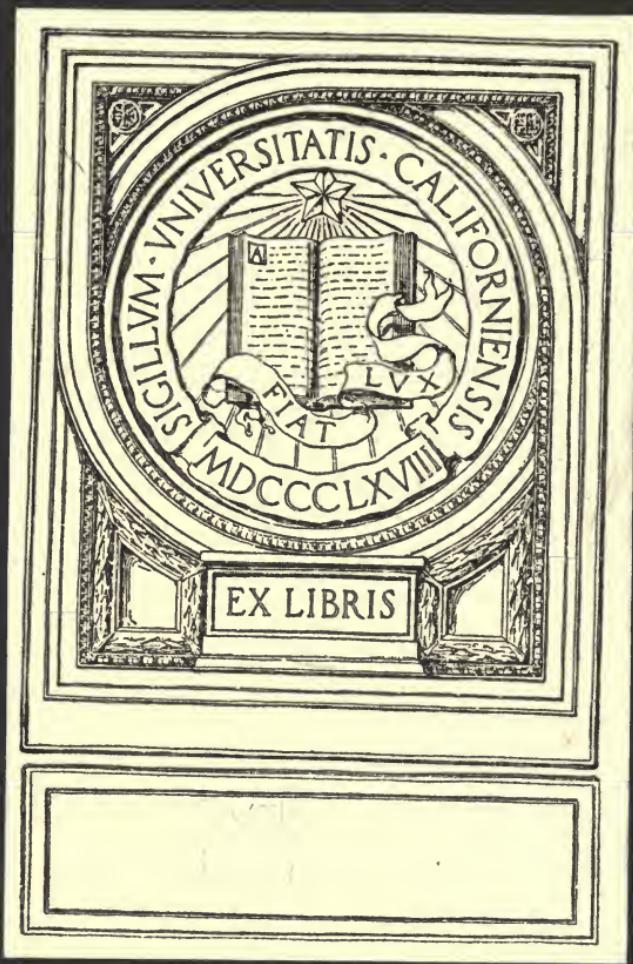
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THE PLACE OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE  
IN THE  
MODERN UNIVERSITY

AN INAUGURAL LECTURE

DELIVERED AT

EAST LONDON COLLEGE ON OCTOBER 2, 1913

BY

SIR SIDNEY LEE

HON. D.LITT. OXFORD, HON. LL.D. GLASGOW, HON. LITT.D. MANCHESTER  
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AT EAST LONDON COLLEGE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

LONDON

SMITH, ELDER & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE

1913

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UNIVERSITY OF  
CALIFORNIA

THE PLACE OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE  
IN THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

I

I WELCOME this opportunity of thanking publicly the Senate of the University of London for appointing me to the newly created chair of English Language and Literature tenable at this college. I have also gratefully to acknowledge the part played in my election by the Principal and Council of this college, and by the Drapers' Company, to whose enlightened munificence this college lies under deep obligation. The Drapers' Company, by virtue of its assiduous promotion of advanced education, is rendering the nation the highest service of which wealth is at the moment capable.

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary for me to mention that my life has thus far been mainly spent in the study rather than in the teaching of English literature. I have not lacked experience as a lecturer or examiner, but my new office gives me larger educational opportunities than any I have yet enjoyed. I enter on my duties with good hope and with a resolve to meet the calls on me to the best of my ability.

What Bacon said of money I hold to be true of learning: it is 'not good except it be spread.'<sup>1</sup> I believe it to

<sup>1</sup> 'Money is like muck, not good except it be spread.'—Essay XV.  
'Of Seditions and Troubles.'

## 2 THE PLACE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

be the worthy ambition of anyone who has accumulated knowledge to seek to share it with others. To hoard learning is as profitless as to hoard gold and silver. A week or two ago M. Poincaré, President of the French Republic and a former Minister of Public Instruction in France, laid down, in an impressive speech delivered at Toulouse University, this proposition : 'A professor should engage in research with activity and zeal ; he should at the same time make his results and his methods of work known to his students and even in certain conditions to the world at large.' It is of importance for the professor to keep in touch with the unlearned as well as with the learned.

In common speech there often attaches to the word 'professor' the notion of a pedant, a recluse, a bookworm. The recent election by a gigantic democracy of a professor to the Presidency of the United States of America, and his success in his new office, seem to prove that professorial energy and capacity are not of necessity destructive of practical wisdom which may serve the general welfare. Although Dr. Woodrow Wilson, the head of the American Republic, creates a precedent which is not likely to be often followed, yet, with the object-lesson of his career in view, the practical man of the world of any country may well think twice before he repeats the old-fashioned taunt of the uselessness of universities, the folly of book-learning, and the unfitness of scholars or professors for general society. It is well that the popular misconception should be challenged, and, if possible, be dispelled.

It is none the less a working professor's duty to advance the bounds of knowledge as a *learner* no less than as a *teacher*. No professor will ever be omniscient. I grow more conscious every day of the width of the tracts of knowledge in my own field which I have either not traversed at all, or traversed imperfectly. I do not forgo the hope of combining with my work here some fresh research elsewhere. I look forward to filling

gaps in my own equipment. Any additions which I may make to my special knowledge will be at my students' disposal, within—and the qualification is important—the limits of their just requirements.

The professor is bound to respect his students' just requirements. A professor would not serve his students' best interest were he to overburden them with the fruit of his special inquiries. After all, a professor's usefulness to his pupils ultimately depends on his power of stimulating them to acquire knowledge for themselves. I conceive of a professor, however erudite, as in essence a quickening spirit. He ought to be liberal in information, but even more liberal in direction and suggestion. His final aim should be to excite in his students that mental resourcefulness which begets self-reliant and independent effort.

## II

The study of English language and literature is a newcomer in the curriculum of advanced education. Only in the latter part of last century was it accorded recognition by English universities. Advanced education in England long developed on lines which wholly ignored the native language. The language and literature of Greece and Rome, with a modest admixture of logic and mathematics, filled the whole curriculum of our universities. It was within the memory of living men that this narrow field saw expansion. By slow degrees, and in the face of formidable opposition, the natural sciences, modern history, modern languages, and finally English language and literature, were admitted to the academic arena.<sup>1</sup>

The widening of the university curriculum beyond

<sup>1</sup> Much interest attaches to the gradual steps whereby English studies won official recognition at Oxford. A full account is given in *The School of English Language and Literature: a contribution to the History of Oxford Studies*, by Professor C. H. Firth. Oxford, 1909.

the confines of classics and mathematics is mainly the work of the young universities of London and of the provinces. In the absence of a rigid tradition the new academic institutions have readily responded to the demands of the nation's intellectual and material development. The new universities multiply a hundredfold the opportunities of advanced education. It is natural that they should broaden the scope of study. The highest ideal of a modern university is catholicity in the range of its curriculum. Provision should be made for students of all intellectual affinities and aspirations. There should be room for the pursuit of all substantive branches of knowledge side by side. Each branch should beware of the precedent of ascendancy which the classics set in the past. Any ambition to play the *rôle* of Aaron's serpent should be repressed. No subject can be spared. The various branches should form collectively a happy family.

The more advanced students in a university rightly specialise in single subjects; the many who are less advanced pursue in London University four subjects together. Each topic of study has to serve two purposes. On the one hand, it should, in its completeness, prove of value and interest to the student as a practically independent and self-sufficing unit. On the other hand, it has, in a partial manifestation, to show itself a useful member of a mixed society. Like its companions, English study must be able, to the general advantage, both to march with other studies and to walk alone.

With, I hope, the modesty befitting a newcomer I propose to consider what may fairly be expected of English study alike as an ally of other studies (for the general student) and as an isolated pursuit (for the specialist). He who delivers an inaugural address should not make too rigid a confession of faith or speak too confidently of his coming labours. The workaday world pays little heed to mere counsels of perfection.

Experience may well compel correction, modification, perhaps reconstruction of the anticipatory views of a new settler. ‘Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.’<sup>1</sup>

### III

The philosophic aim, I take it, of advanced education in its widest aspect, is to rouse in the student an active and lasting enthusiasm for things of the mind, and to foster disciplined habits of thought. The final hope will be to excite in him a desire and capacity for well-considered research. At the same time the student has a right to expect instruction which shall contribute to the material welfare of his future life. It is quixotic to ignore the practical motives of advanced education, although it may be disadvantageous to parade them unduly. With a frankness which is not to be rashly emulated, Bacon remarked that close study is pursued ‘most times for lucre and a profession, and seldom sincerely to give a true account of our gift of reason for the benefit and use of man.’<sup>2</sup> There is need, at any rate, of a co-ordination of the practical with the ideal. Advanced education cannot afford to ignore either side of the shield. English study will have to satisfy the normal duality of outlook. Whatever intellectual or spiritual contribution it make, either to the general training of advanced students who are not confining their energies to it, or to the special training of those who concentrate on it all or most part of their undergraduate activity, it should give some kind of aid in the pursuit of a vocation.

The main theme of English study is English literature. English language must always remain a subsidiary branch of the study. Literature is the mistress of the household, language the chief handmaiden. Philology has immense

<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings xx. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Bacon’s Essay I. ‘Of Studies.’

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claims to the student's attention; it can exert an immense fascination; but by the nature of things it is subject in English study to the superior control of literature. Verbal structure is secondary to mental substance.

It is needless to cite definitions of literature. We all know it to be the storehouse of the best thought and feeling, set forth in the most lucid, harmonious, and pleasure-giving forms, of which words are capable. Milton called a book 'the precious life-blood of a master spirit.'<sup>1</sup> The eloquent phrase sufficiently suggests what literature is and distinguishes it from what it is not. The word 'literature' is often loosely applied to any writing which is committed to print. But true literature has to satisfy a more exacting test. In matter and manner it has to stir an intellectual or an emotional interest, an admiration and a delight transcending any impression produced by the record of a literal experience. Literature is no mere reporting of human affairs. Life is its raw material. But the raw material of life is steeped in a flood of thought and imagination before great literature comes into being. Literature makes a threefold appeal—to the mind, to the heart, and to the ear, and it should generate a sensation of elevated pleasure.

Literature is of varied texture, of varied forms, of varied values. Like the firmament it finds place for stars of many magnitudes. Shakespeare's work is the greatest contribution to English literature. But an infinite mass of writing, inferior to his, lies within the limits of English study, which should be comprehensive. We are bound to descend from the summit of the mountain and explore the slopes until we reach that border-line near the base which severs significant literature from insignificant. There is no real difficulty in distinguishing worthless literature from that which for our purposes has some measure of worth.

<sup>1</sup> Milton's *Areopagitica*, ed. J. W. Hales, 1887, p. 6.

Critics may differ as to the precise place that an author should hold in the scale of fame. But there comes a time in the career of every book when a final decision is reached as to its general merit. The student will not wisely ignore any book which has been admitted by recognised authority within the charmed circle.

Current writing which awaits the final verdict does not claim the attention of the lecture room. The student may be well advised if in his leisure he attempt to appraise current writing by the standard of the old literature which has stood Time's test. Current writing is for the most part ephemeral writing, and pretends to nothing beyond providing amusement, recreation, or mere instruction. Literature of that restricted aim has no lawful place in the literary course of a university.

#### IV

When in the last century the study of English was struggling for recognition in the curriculum at Oxford, resistance was based on a series of pleas which still deserve passing attention. First it was argued that the reading of English literature by English students called for no such mental effort as was justly required of an instrument of education. Latin and Greek construing and composition were gymnastic exercises of the mind for which English study offered no opportunity. In the second place it was argued that the appreciation and proper comprehension of English literature depended solely on taste or feeling, that an endeavour to teach taste or feeling was as futile as to try to teach personal beauty, and that to 'examine' in taste or feeling was like seeking to weigh in avoirdupois scales the colour of the hair or eye. The innuendo here was that no subject in which it was difficult to 'examine' was fit to be taught. In the third place it was represented that the professor of English literature had nothing to

offer his students save criticism of literature or gossip about literary men, and neither could rise far above the level of idle chatter. In a word the study of literature, according to this depreciatory estimate, was imbued with a dilettantism which was foreign and fatal to the academic atmosphere. These arguments, which for a time carried weight at Oxford and elsewhere, are worthy of attention as plausible misconceptions. It may be useful to trick them out in their true colours.

The study of English inevitably divides itself into four main branches—(1) criticism, (2) history, (3) philology, and (4) composition or practical experiment in the art of expression on the part of the student. All the branches need concurrent treatment, though the student may be led by his idiosyncrasy to pay greater attention to one than to another. No Oxford critic is likely to charge philology or history with vagueness or frivolity. Students' experiments in composition have been known to betray such qualities, but these defects, as I hope to prove, are remediable accidents. It is, in any case, at criticism that the sceptic points the finger of scorn most confidently. I accept the challenge, for criticism is at the root of the whole matter. The ultimate good derivable from the academic study of English literature will largely depend on the professor's practical interpretation of that chameleon-like term.

I will examine the kinship of literature with history, philology, and the practice of composition in the order in which I name those topics. But I will first invite your attention to the vexed character of criticism in the present context. In my belief the problem revolving about the precise meaning of the word is rather less perplexing than it looks at first sight. 'Exegesis,' a Greek word which literally means 'the leading out of a thing that which is in it,' is a satisfactory synonym for literary criticism in the academic sense. Its signification is quite plain. Exegesis embraces all

means of throwing light on the text of a piece of writing and of drawing forth its full meaning ; it examines the form ; it seeks to unravel the mode of composition ; it traces the inspiration to its sources ; it shows the strength or weakness of the author's thought and feeling. Literary criticism is in the university no lighthearted expression of the personal likes and dislikes of professor or student. It applies scholarly, even scientific, principles of inquiry to the intellectual and emotional phenomena within its sphere. It aims at determining the true force and value of literary matter and manner.

This is not the occasion to descend to details. But it will be understood that to test the genuineness of an author's text, to discover the materials on which he worked, to analyse the dominant features of the style, is no elegant trifling. A student will usually find it of service to acquaint himself with the contemporary estimate of an author, and with any surviving comments by the author on his own work. Thus he may the better attune his mind to the author's purpose. Finally the student will be required to describe the impression which the work leaves on his own intelligence. Room must always be left in the fabric of literary study for the play of the student's individual taste and judgment.

If all be done efficiently, there will be no rambling incoherence at any stage. The critical training will be at all points systematic. The reading of books in a literary school must be no lazy sauntering along a level or a downhill path. It should be a bracing exercise. It is a wrestling with ideas greater than any we can create for ourselves ; it is a striving to get into close touch with thought and fancy, which are above our capacity to invent.

There is an auxiliary department of literary criticism which can never be safely ignored, at any rate by special students. It is criticism which commonly bears the

distinctive epithet of 'comparative.' Comparative criticism is the testing of one nation's literature by a comparison of it with that of other nations. Literature is a living organism gathering sustenance from all quarters. No great national literature has ever subsisted without some foreign nutrition. English literature owes almost as deep a debt to classical literature as Roman poetry owed to Greek. But the classics are only one of the many foreign sources of English poetry and prose. 'A people [wrote Walter Pater] without intellectual commerce with other peoples has never done anything conspicuous in literature.' The foreign element is always there. It should be defined and weighed. Some study of foreign literature should therefore form an integral part of a sound critical analysis of English literary achievement. English literature cannot be viewed in a just perspective until the comparative study has brought some foreign literature within the range of the student's vision. Elizabethan literature, for example, has an unassailable line of foreign descent and kinship, and disregard of the pedigree involves a risk of ignoring the processes at work in its composition and of distorting the critical judgment. Absolute originality of idea or of form is rarer in great literature than is commonly imagined. Inventiveness in literature is a power of infinite gradations, which the comparative method of study will alone enable us to adjust nicely.<sup>1</sup> A piece of great literature is usually a mighty chain of which the links are forged in many workshops.

The history of literature, the second division of our study, needs no elaborate definition. In literary history we seek the external circumstances—political, social,

<sup>1</sup> It is more important to determine what a great author makes of his borrowings or his adaptations of foreign ideas than to set forth in all its minutiae that which he has borrowed or adapted. But we must know in some detail what an author absorbs from others before we can estimate his eminence finally; not otherwise shall we stand on firm critical ground.

economic—in which literature is produced. Literary history co-ordinates, either chronologically or according to the special branch of effort, the lives of authors; it dates events with precision and deduces facts from original authorities. We learn the circumstances attending the publication of great books, and the personal relations in which the writers stood in life to one another and to the world at large. A mere collection of dates, facts, and names has been known to do duty for literary history. Dates, facts, and names form a non-nutritious diet for students of literature, whose memory should not be suffered to work mechanically, but should be fertilised by genuine mental effort. Literary history ought to be no skeleton, no charnel house of dry bones. It should be a thing of flesh and blood, a living guide to the aspiration and practical endeavour of the author and a moving picture of his environment.

Philology deals with words which are the raw materials of literature. Language is in many ways the most magical of all man's attributes. The wonders of wireless telegraphy pale into insignificance before the miraculous working of the tongue and pen. Philology well deserves all the labour that has been bestowed upon it, and the student of literature who fails to realise its importance will never be wholly efficient. Philology has all the characteristics of an exact science, and has the same disciplinary value. Language is always growing; it is always shedding old words and inflections, and putting forth new expressions. Words constantly change their meaning. Some which are held by one age to be inelegant or indelicate or pedantic are welcomed by another age to the best verbal company. Great literature is for ever offering new material for philological inquiry. One of the benefits which great authors render their fellow countrymen is the invention of new words to express new thoughts, or, it may be, old thoughts to which language has not hitherto done justice. There is no stagnation in

a living tongue, and a due comprehension of a great people's literature through the centuries presumes a thorough understanding of the language in all its stages. The student has to master all the processes of decay and growth from the earliest till the latest period. The earliest stages will be less familiar than the latter and will absorb much of his attention. But no stage will he safely overlook. Philology embraces every aspect of language. Under its ægis stands the study of phonetics—the science of pronunciation—which is rapidly growing in scholarly favour. Pronunciation is a potent force in the formation and transformation of words. Philology and phonetics are both pursuits ancillary to literature, but there will be small hope for the efficiency of literary study if the philological branch be treated lightly.

## V

The last branch of literary study, to which I direct your attention, is the practice of literary composition by the student. From a national point of view this branch might seem to transcend in importance the other three. It will not be pursued successfully if the others be neglected; it can hardly be pursued at all if the first branch, literary criticism, be ~~not~~ treated perfunctorily.

I would lay down the axiom that no one writes well who has not read well, that no one writes good English who has not read good English with appreciation and intelligence. Consider historically what it is that has prompted good writing in the past. The command of a definite thought and the ambition to divulge it to others have rarely proved in themselves quite sufficient motive forces. In one or other degree assimilation of pre-existing literature is a main element in all effective literary composition. Whether a writer be great or small, he will be seen on due inquiry to assimilate much that

others have written, before he produce anything memorable. In the evolution of literary expression there is no process that can be confidently described as spontaneous generation. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* is a maxim applicable to the composition of literature as to that of all else.

Originality in literature usually means the saying—in a more convincing, more impressive, more beautiful way—of something nearly resembling what has been said before. Acquired or inherited knowledge is provided with a new setting; it receives a new application, a new significance. But processes of assimilation have been first at work.

This conclusion is not merely true of men of ordinary and mediocre capacity; it applies to men of highest genius. Shakespeare's work is an exemplification of it. Endless modes of pre-existing thought and style wrought on his mind before his supreme power revealed itself. In the effort of humbler persons who, having no claim to genius, cherish the praiseworthy ambition to write their own language perspicuously and with propriety, a more or less deliberate cultivation of the assimilative faculty is primarily essential to a profitable issue. The testimony of a recent eminent man of letters, Robert Louis Stevenson, clears the point of doubt. Other witnesses of the same calibre might be cited: but Stevenson's detailed description of the manner in which he became a writer is especially pertinent to my present argument. ' Whenever I read a book [he wrote] or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and the co-ordination of parts. . . . I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to .

Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire, and to Obermann. That, like it or not, is the way to learn to write ; whether I have profited or not, that is the way. It was so Keats learned, and there was never a finer temperament for literature than Keats's ; it was so, if we could trace it out, that all men have learned.<sup>1</sup> Dryden's counsel on the same subject offers useful corroboration : 'The proprieties and delicacies of English are known to few. It is impossible even for a good wit to understand and practice them without the help of a liberal education, long reading, and digesting of those few good authors we have amongst us.'<sup>2</sup>

Stevenson's way we must all follow. By assimilation, of course, I do not mean plagiarism or, to use a shorter term, 'cribbing,' which is a reprehensible practice. We should read good books with our full attention. We should form a habit of drinking in the matter and manner of our author—without excess of conscious effort, without overstraining the attention. Our minds should become steeped intuitively and instinctively in our study. Some mechanical rules may be of service. Passages that move our special admiration may be committed to memory or to a commonplace book. The reading of literature aloud aids one immensely in appreciating the qualities of its structure. We should take especial note of the way in which paragraphs are built up by practised pens. The common rules of grammar and syntax should be respected. But if our hopes of good writing are to be

<sup>1</sup> Stevenson's *Memories and Portraits : A College Magazine*.

<sup>2</sup> To these aids to good writing Dryden adds, as no less important, 'the knowledge of men and manners, the freedom of habitudes and conversation with the best company of both sexes.' Valuable, too, is Dryden's final word of advice to the student who would excel in composition that he should neglect no opportunities of 'wearing off the rust which he contracted while he was laying in a stock of learning.'—'Preface to *Sylvæ or the Second Part of Poetical Miscellanies*' (1685) in *Critical Essays*, ed. Ker. i. 253.

realised, all the mechanism should become part of our nature. In the result we ought to discover in ourselves a power of expression, a command of vocabulary which will be coloured by our reading, although there should be no slavish reproduction of any man's style or words. Probably we shall never write so well as any of our models. But we may look forward to acquiring, in the light of our reading, a facility, a grace, a clearness which will be beyond our grasp if we remain in ignorance of the written work of great authors.

A study of literature which does not endow the student with the desire and the ability to write well, misses great part of its true aim. Fine writing, the use of slang, tautology, are some of the pitfalls against which the student always has to be vigilant. But in the light of great literature he ought quickly to realise that the merit of writing is proportioned to its simplicity, directness, good taste, sincerity. An orderly arrangement of thought should keep pace with an easy flow of words. The student should pray with Milton that his words 'like so many nimble and airy servitors will trip about him at command, and in well-ordered files, as he would wish, will fall aptly into their own places.'<sup>1</sup> I hope for the best, although I do not underrate the difficulties. Never, at any rate, ought a conscientious student to have ground for reproaching his teacher of literature at the end of the course in such words as these of Shakespeare :

' My tongue's use is to me no more  
 Than an unstringed viol or a harp,  
 Or like a cunning instrument cas'd up  
 Or, being open, put into his hands  
 That knows no touch to tune the harmony.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Milton, *Apology for Smectymnuus*. In Shakespeare's *Henry VIII.*  
 (ii. 4. 114-6) a cognate idea finds expression :

Your words,  
 Domestics to you, serve your will as 't please  
 Yourself pronounce their office.

<sup>2</sup> *Richard II*, i. iii. 161 seq.

Of students who justly echoed such a rebuke it might well be said in Milton's phrase :

'The hungry sheep *looked* up, and *were* not fed.'<sup>1</sup>

When we sum up the general value of English study in advanced education, we may be inclined to set the highest value on its power of encouraging good writing. Whatever one's walk in life or one's special interest, whether we become men of science or engage in commerce or in work of administration, the power of writing well will always increase one's efficiency and contribute to one's success. Complaint is commonly made that, owing to defects in our educational system, a command of clear and pointed language is more narrowly distributed in England than in other countries. Lord Haldane, the late Secretary of State for War, declared not long ago that few officers in the army were able to write an intelligible despatch. Men of science, eminent in their profession, have been accused within very recent years of inability to set forth their results effectively. I have heard critics of our present educational method—the critics are numerous and voluble—assert that schoolmasters in high position do not always write English which can be understood. I do not know how far these censures are justified; but I know how a promising attempt may be made to remedy such defects wherever they are proved to exist. Let every student, whatever other work he may be doing, devote some part of his time to an intelligent study of great English literature. Thus only may he realise the capacity of language to express thought with grace and clearness.

## VI

There are many other advantages no less substantial, although not so easy to bring home to the world at large,

<sup>1</sup> *Lycidas*, line 125. 'The hungry sheep look up and are not fed.'

which the general student will derive from the partial application of his time to literary study. More than 200 years ago, in 1708, a first tentative effort was made to recognise poetry at Oxford as an academic subject, by the foundation of a chair of poetry. The unprecedented step was justified on the ground that 'the reading of the old poets contributes not only to give keenness and polish to the natural endowment of young men, but also to the advancement of severer learning whether sacred or human.'<sup>1</sup> That is a text still worth emblazoning in places of education. It might be added by way of gloss that the student of English literature comes into direct intercourse with great minds. 'The reading of books,' said an older author than the one I have just cited, 'what is it but conversing with the wisest men of all ages and all countries, who thereby communicate to us their most deliberate thoughts, choicest notions, and best inventions, couched in good expression, and digested in exact method?'<sup>2</sup> These words also deserve general currency. To come into touch with the 'most deliberate thoughts, choicest notions, and best inventions' of great thinkers is inevitably to quicken enthusiasm, to encourage high purpose, to broaden interest and experience.

All great literatures—Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, Spanish—hold in solution the spirit of liberal culture such as universities exist to disseminate. Foreign literatures are composed of the same constituent elements as those with which we credit English literature. But English literature is our own literature. It may be said, without undue self-assertion, to enjoy at the moment a patent of precedence in the world at large. In France, Germany, Russia, and Italy, English literature is studied with almost as much zeal as the indigenous literature. It is reckoned in those foreign lands a liberalising agent. It

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Prof. J. W. Mackail's *Henry Birkhead and the foundation of the Oxford Chair of Poetry*, 1908, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Barrow, Sermons: 'Of Industry in our Particular Calling as Scholars.'

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is difficult to dispute, in presence of the universal estimate, that English literature at an English university should fill a foremost place in the hierarchy of literary studies.

By the special students of English in an English university, these conclusions will be accepted without demur. The special student will pursue each of the four branches of the study—criticism, history, philology, and composition—with a greater concentration than the students who are not specialising in English. Their reading will be wider, their scholarship should be more profound, and as writers they should wield a more supple pen. It is to be hoped that some special students, after they have taken their first degree, will engage in original research which may add to the stock of knowledge and advance the cause of learning. They will find stimulating examples abroad. Foreign students of English in foreign universities have prepared many monographs embodying discoveries of value. The field is not all explored. There is room for fresh labourers. No college will completely fulfil its function if it fails to foster some post-graduate research. The professor should endeavour to point out such learning as is already available, but the best proof of his success will lie in the endeavour of some of his students to better his instruction and to make paths for themselves in unknown territory.

## VII

The laboratory of the English student is the library, and no English school can flourish without a large and well-ordered storehouse of books. The fit equipment of an English school costs very much less than the fit equipment of a scientific and certainly of an engineering school. But it costs something. The student must have ready to his hand the best texts of every author who has made any memorable contribution of whatever value or dimensions to the nation's literary achievement.

The texts are of primary importance. Cheap reprints, however welcome in certain conditions, will not serve the full need of the scholar. He must make direct acquaintance with the written word in the form in which, as far as it can be ascertained, it came from the pen of the author. The student must be on his guard against the inevitable frailties of the printer who hastily reproduces the text for the undiscerning market.

The scholarly text is the first and foremost source of literary knowledge. No sound progress is possible without it. Most of the old authors have now been carefully edited on scholarly lines, and they circulate in paper and print worthy of their eminence. It is to the standard editions of repute that the student should have constant access in the college library. At the same time the student should in addition have at his command there a well-chosen store of wise and pertinent comment, and all treatises of philology and literary history and biography, which lend genuine help to interpretation. Not all annotation of literature satisfies that qualifying clause. There are editions of great authors in which the author's words meander like a trickling stream through a boundless and barren desert of editorial comment. The test of a good commentary lies in its terseness and relevance. Its value is usually in inverse ratio to the bulk.

In the case of special students, lists of books bearing on their own subject will prove valuable implements of work. The scholar constantly needs to know what others are doing in his own department of study, not merely all over the country but all over the world. In any topic which, like our topic, attracts widespread industry, we should have ready access to critical bibliographies well up to date.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The 'Literary Supplement' of *The Times*, which appears every Thursday, has a useful descriptive bibliography of the week's publications, which is always worth consulting. The English Association publishes thrice a year a 'Bulletin,' which has a valuable bibliography of current English study in all its branches, both at home and abroad.

A college library, if sufficient money is expended on it, can be made to meet most of the student's needs. But as his ambition advances and his range of outlook widens, it may be needful for him to seek admission to a larger treasury of books than any local institution can conveniently house. The national library at the British Museum will alone satisfy the requirements of any who engage in original and independent research. But an English library, planned on the comparatively modest lines which I have laid down, is a preliminary condition of the successful conduct of any English school.

At the same time the student of English must not place all his reliance on the college library, or even on the national library. From an early date in his career he should seek to form a library of his own. Naturally one's own collection of books must be proportioned to one's means. From the lives of those who have been imbued by nature with a passion for literature, and have distinguished themselves in future careers, I could quote many heroic instances of physical sufferings cheerfully encountered in youth in the endeavour to acquire books.<sup>1</sup>

No comparable sacrifice is asked of anyone in these days of cheap reprints. The cheap reprints of great literature which abound at the moment may not satisfy the highest demands of scholarly study, but they are useful auxiliaries because they give the young student

<sup>1</sup> William Cobbett's account of his first experience as a bookbuyer is typical of many in a like situation in youth. Cobbett writes: 'When only eleven years old, with three pence in my pocket—my whole fortune—I perceived at Richmond, in a bookseller's window, a little book, marked "Price Threepence"—Swift's "Tale of a Tub." Its odd title excited my curiosity; I bought it in place of my supper. So impatient was I to examine it that I got over into a field at the upper corner of Kew Gardens, and sat down to read, on the shady side of a haystack. The book was so different from anything I had read before—it was something so new to my mind that, though I could not at all understand some parts of it, still it delighted me beyond measure, and produced what I have always considered a sort of birth of intellect. I read on till it was dark, without any thought of supper or bed.' Cobbett's *Advice to Young Men*, 1830.

whose pecuniary resources are small the opportunity of acquiring for himself the records of great thought, great ideas, great emotion.<sup>1</sup>

I will not decry the practice of borrowing books provided the borrower return them punctually and in good condition. Every student is bound to borrow a great many expensive books or to read them in the college or in a public library. But the borrowing of books has little spiritual advantage compared with the buying of books for oneself. The sense of ownership of books is an ennobling pleasure. There is no sordid alloy in that acquisitive instinct.

## VIII

In conclusion, let me pass from any purely academic view of English literature. A larger point of view justly claims the last word. Will not a knowledge of great literature, and such a habit of reading it as calls into play the higher faculties, make for something more valuable even than first-class honours in examinations, and the prizes which those honours bring? The effectual study of literature can hardly fail to make for the happiness of the student's life in all its future stages. It has been said—a little extravagantly—that reading can get the better of most physical sufferings, all indeed save the pangs of hunger. Literary sympathy and enthusiasm will certainly give consolation in times of

<sup>1</sup> Great English literature in almost all its branches is very readily accessible in the following series of cheap reprints: Everyman's Library (published by Dent and Co.); Temple Classics (Dent and Co.; 1s. 6d. net); World's Classics (Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press); Oxford Standard Authors (Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press; 1s. 6d. net); Universal Library (Routledge); New Universal Library (Routledge); Muses' Library (Routledge); Canterbury Poets (Walter Scott Co.); The Scott Library (Walter Scott Co.); Bohn's Popular Library (George Bell and Son). The same book is found repeated in many of these series. Except in the cases specified, the cost of each volume is a shilling.

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sorrow and add zest to the enjoyment of good fortune. I do not claim that academic training is essential to the creation of a love of right reading. But I hold that academic training, if it be wisely devised, can stimulate the healthy growth of that beneficent taste, may even create it in those in whom it has not been implanted by nature and is discouraged by environment. I hope that in the succession of students who graduate from this college there will be many who, having studied English literature here, will spread far and wide in the outer world the glad tidings of literature's saving grace.

## APPENDIX

### I

(From *The Morning Post*, October 3, 1913; reprinted by kind permission.)

EAST LONDON COLLEGE had a happy inspiration when it invited Sir Sidney Lee to occupy its chair of English. For the college may be described as a university *in partibus*; it is an institution for giving the best possible teaching to those whom that teaching may attract in a region where education needs lifting up, and in which it will lift up those that can receive it. For that purpose no teaching can be too good. Sir Sidney Lee is steeped in English literature, and what is more he has made his name by independent work in that field. None knows so well where to find the choice grapes as he that has laboured in the vineyard. But Sir Sidney Lee, too, is to be congratulated on his election, because it is good for a man who has dug deep into a subject to have to act as a guide to beginners. The best use of brains is to be picked, and the best pickers are the young men and women drawn to university studies. An inaugural lecture is always a delicate affair; it involves a man's making a claim for his subject, and is apt to transform a scholar into an advertising agent. Yet Sir Sidney Lee's brief and terse address is worth reading. It goes to the point, and interperses the indispensable platitudes with shrewd hints for students and others. We hope that the managers of East London College will take the Professor's excellent hints on the requisites of a college library of English literature and provide the students freely with all the best works of the classes which he enumerated. If they do that and allow their Professor to regulate the examinations by reducing

them to one essay written at home and one essay written in the examination room they will have deserved well of East London.

That English is entitled to a place in the education of English people is nowadays nearly everywhere admitted, after a long struggle, in which, as Sir Sidney Lee said, the new universities have done their share of the fighting. It is true that a man may take the highest honours at Oxford without ever having been asked a question on the English language or its literature. But he will not gain that distinction unless he can write, and he will hardly be able to write if he has read no English authors. The assumption is that he will read them as he goes along, without the help or supervision of a professor. For persons less gifted and with fewer advantages—the first-class man is supposed to read Latin and Greek as readily as English, and much expense has been bestowed upon him—some sort of guidance and stimulus is needed. But the business of encouragement and help in English studies has been sadly marred by ill-considered pedagogic zeal. The universities, when they instituted local examinations for boys and girls, rightly established English as a subject. They give out as set books a play of Shakespeare or a book or two of Chaucer or Spenser. Thereupon the children at school are set to work to get up the notes of some commentator in vogue, and the examiners test their acquaintance with the rubbish-heap so created. The consequence is that most of the children are set against Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Spenser for life. Instead of the class reading the play for the fun of it and the teacher explaining the out-of-the-way words as they come; the child is told that unless it can explain *miching mallecho*, derive *fardels*, and give the dates of the four folios, it will assuredly be ploughed. This sort of thing must be got up from the notes. Hence torments and tears, instead of the joy that would have come if the children had been sent at the start to a good performance of the play as Shakespeare wrote it—such a performance as that of ‘Twelfth Night’ at the Savoy a few months ago. The educational process to be derived from good literature consists in reading a good book with enjoyment. Everything else is secondary. This process should be passed through between the ages of fourteen and twenty. When the schools have so reformed themselves as to secure this

there will be a chance for the university study of literature, which involves something more. The schools are trying to reform themselves, and would have done it ere now but for the examiners and the superstition that certificates and degrees are the great end of all instruction. The true end of instruction in literature is taste and judgment, the capacity of taking delight in thoughts and feelings well expressed. The university study of a literature was well described by Sir Sidney Lee. It means the critical study of masterpieces, and involves the close analysis of the thought and the expression, the inquiry into the relation between the author and his environment. It applies a variety of historical studies to the understanding of an author—it makes use of the history of his language, and the history of his times. It traces the influence upon him of the authors who came before him in his own and other countries. A man can enjoy Spenser if he knows no language but English ; Goethe if he knows no language but German ; Dante if he knows no language but Italian. But to appreciate these authors, to see how they came to write as they did, more is necessary. To understand Spenser a man must be acquainted with Ariosto and Tasso ; to appreciate the rise of Goethe he must steep himself in Rousseau ; to appreciate Dante he must be familiar with Virgil. In this comparative study of literatures Sir Sidney Lee is a past master. He has been fired with its interest, and his students will catch the spark.

The cry has been for some years past that young people in England are not taught to write. Accordingly English composition is coming into vogue. But there is really only one way of learning to write. The power comes with the impulse, and the impulse is derived from admiration. The boy or girl who is carried away with a sense of the beauty of a poem or of a passage of some great writer of prose, tries to produce something like it. That is the beginning of writing ; the rest is practice. Sir Sidney Lee put this very well before his hearers. He referred incidentally to the complaint that the officers of the army do not excel in English composition. They never will, and never can, until it becomes the habit at the schools and colleges where they are brought up to read with interest some of the English writers—poets, essayists, or historians—whom the world has learned to admire. Mr. Churchill was an officer in the army, yet he

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can write. The explanation of his having this power is not that anyone taught him English composition, but that as a young man he read Gibbon and took delight in a great author. Sir Sidney Lee claimed for England's great writers that they should 'fill a foremost place in the hierarchy of literary studies.' That every young Englishman and English-woman who has a taste for reading should be encouraged to read English authors before others, is right and proper. But in the university stage there is no priority of subjects. The critical method can be acquired and practised upon any author or any literature, and the choice is for the student. What it is vital to establish is the critical kind of study recognising no priority, no superior claim of one language or period over another. There the method is all. And of the method the essence is that the student should use his own eyes and mind ; that he should learn to work for himself at first hand and not be content, like a schoolboy, merely to take in what a professor tells him. That is partly what Sir Sidney Lee meant when he told his students, in the detestable jargon of the day, that they should 'engage in original research.' His other meaning was that some of them should follow his example and become labourers in the same field. We agree with his exhortation, and will forgive him the uncouth expression out of gratitude for the good sense which pervades his address.

## II

(From *The Times*, October 6, 1913; reprinted by kind permission.)

### A WORD FOR CRITICISM

SIR SIDNEY LEE, in his inaugural lecture at East London College, said a good word for criticism, an art which is seldom well spoken of in this country, perhaps because it is not often well practised. The very word critic has a mean and ugly sound for us, and makes us think of a sour person who is always telling us not to like what we do like. We remember the derivation of the word, and criticism for us means judgment in the legal sense—the judgment of one who has appointed himself to preside over a Court of his own, to

which all authors or other artists are summoned as accused persons, and from which very few are dismissed without a stain on their characters. Well, that kind of criticism exists and is perhaps useful where living writers are concerned, not because they are criminals, but because there are so many of them. The public needs a taster, some one who will tell them, roughly and hastily enough, which books out of the multitudes published have any merit at all. The taster has a heavy task, and it is only natural that he should try to lighten it by giving himself airs of importance. He would no doubt much rather be a popular novelist than a taster, so he consoles himself by thinking that he is the popular novelist's judge. The novelist resents this, and tells the public that the critic is a poor creature who has no right to criticise what he cannot do himself; and the public, while still employing tasters and paying some heed to them, despises them at its heart. It is unfortunate, therefore, that we should have only one word for this humble business of tasting and for the criticism of which Sir Sidney Lee spoke—the criticism which is not judgment in any legal sense, but, as he put it, exegesis, 'the leading out of a book all that is in it.'

Literature, and all art, is a human activity of the greatest significance and importance. It is at the same time one of those facts which make us wonder at life and an expression of our wonder at it. In spite of the vast experience of life that is behind us, we are incessantly surprised by it, surprised both when the expected and when the unexpected happens, and literature is a record of those surprises. But as the true artist is continually surprised by life, so the true critic is continually surprised by art; and because of his surprise he is the very opposite of a judge, in the legal sense, whose business is not to be surprised at anything, but to lay down the law. To the true critic Homer and Shakespeare are not precedents but surprises, just as to them life itself was a surprise and not a collection of precedents. Most of us are too apt to take Homer and Shakespeare for granted, to accept what they say as if it had been said by a syndicate of great men before ever the world was made, as if it expressed not wonder but omniscience. But they and all great artists are great because life was to them an astonishing discovery. Things were always happening to them for the first time.

and stirring their emotions as only surprises can. And so they are always happening for the first time to the great critic, just as much as if they were writing to-day. He, because real art is always a surprise to him, recognises the surprise in all real art, recognises in the artist that faculty which makes him a critic. And for that very reason he is equally aware when a writer expresses no surprise, or rather when he only expresses the surprise of some one else. He knows real art from sham, not by any rules or precedents which he and the other critics have established, but simply from the fact that real art surprises him and sham art fails to do so. Real art is unexpected because it expresses the unexpected, whereas sham art is expected because it expresses the expected ; and for him real art keeps its unexpectedness, however old it may be and however much obscured by dull commentary and conventional admiration. So, when he is confronted with new art, he is neither disgusted nor captivated by any novelty of form in it. He looks to it for just the same surprise that he finds in Shakespeare, whereas the bad critic, for whom Shakespeare has no surprises, either hopes that a new poet will shock him out of his dullness or resents in that new poet any difference from what he thinks that he admires in Shakespeare.

Of course the expression of mere surprise will not make a great critic any more than a great artist, but the faculty of surprise is a symptom of the qualities necessary to both. It is a kind of sense generated by experience, without which nothing can be done in art or in criticism. The dull man may be surprised by particular events because they are out of the common ; but the great artist is surprised by the whole process of life, and its effect on him is cumulative, so that its very routine becomes surprising to him as part of the great wonder of the whole. And in his art it is this general surprise which he expresses and the incessant emotion that it stirs in him. So the great critic expresses his general surprise at literature ; he has taken that for his province out of the whole of life, and he makes it his business to communicate his surprise to others. That is what we mean when we say that he has something new to tell us. It is not a new fact that he reveals to us, but his surprise at an old one, at the everlasting adventure of man's mind. It is his business also to warn us off literature in which there is no

adventure of the mind, not to be deceived by it, however skilfully it may simulate the wonder of discovery; but when he does that it is only as a means to an end, and he takes no pleasure in doing it for its own sake. For him sham art is a foil to real, and he has more joy in discovering one work of art than in detecting fifty frauds.

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